

Just Another Day by boltplum

Series: [Harringrove Personal Favorites \[3\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Season/Series 02, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Billy Hargrove Has a Crush on Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove Is Bad at Feelings, Billy Hargrove Needs Love, Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Person, Bisexual Steve Harrington, Comfort/Angst, Coming Out, Emotional Baggage, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, First Kiss, Fist Fights, Groundhog Day, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Mutual Pining, POV Steve Harrington, Past Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Period-Typical Homophobia, Protective Steve Harrington, Time Loop, also Billy gives Dustin love advice

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, The Party (Stranger Things)

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-05-14

Updated: 2021-05-14

Packaged: 2022-04-01 00:55:56

Rating: Mature

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 13,592

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Will Byers didn't die. El closed the gate and Steve kept the kids alive. Then Steve wakes up the next day to do it all over again...and again, and again. Until one morning, Billy shows up at his door saying he's been living the same day over too.

-

"You know then?" Steve asks him, staring him down.

Billy's eyes shift between his face, his shirtlessness, and then back to his eyes.

"Yeah. You gonna let me in or what?"

Just Another Day

Author's Note:

This was originally posted on my old account on 02/05/2020. I'm not going to backdate it because apparently that's awful for hits. I have one more old fic to get up and then everything going forward is new. Hope new readers and old alike enjoy it~

i. what happened first

Will Byers is going to die.

Well, probably.

The kid looks about ready to bite it, is all. And Steve doesn't think anything the group or more specifically, Jonathan could do, worrying over his unconscious little brother included, can help the situation. It's a crisis for sure.

But so is the way Nancy has her hand on Jonathan's shoulder.

Steve knows about them. He's *known*, okay? Knew it from the start. Knew it even back when he'd taken Nancy on their first proper date, and all she could talk about was the missing Byers boy.

Nothing's changed much, at least.

Here they are, a year later, worrying over the same kid for some of the same reasons. Only now it's easier to see where they all stand. Crystal clear. Message received.

Maybe it's good Dustin took the bouquet from him. He would have just been embarrassing himself had Nancy been home to see him come to grovel. Right?

Steve isn't an angry guy, okay? And he can't hold a grudge to save his life, *alright*? But what he can do, and has found himself doing for a

while now, is have his thoughts often drift to Nancy and Jonathan to wonder *what*. What did he do?

What did he do wrong? What did he do right? What could he have done to keep her?

Why did Nancy stay with him after the whole movie marquee fiasco only to leave him for Jonathan after the Halloween party? And yeah he knows that's not exactly how things went down, but close enough.

He's spent a lot of time thinking about the last year. Ruminating. Just plain rueing. Because it's not fair, is it? To fall in love so hard and then have it taken away from you? By someone you thought you made amends with.

Because he and Jonathan are *friends* now. Steve takes that shit seriously, okay? He ditched Tommy and Carol because he finally saw them for who they are; two unhappy, petty and childish people, who were only together through their mutual hatred of everyone else. It took a few months with Nancy and a couple punches from Jonathan to make him realize he didn't like who he'd been all his life. Made him want to change and be better.

And he was better with Nancy. Steve liked himself when he was with her. Nancy Wheeler made Steve Harrington good.

That's love, right?

And now, without Nancy, who is he? What's the point of it all? He hates that he was ever dumb enough to fall in love in the first place.

Steve's in a house full of kids and his ex and her new...whatever Jonathan is to her now, and the chief of police, and it's weird, okay? All of it's insane. How did he end up here, staring out of Joyce Byers' kitchen window waiting for monsters he knows will show up? If not tonight, then tomorrow night, then the night after, then a year from now.

Maybe it's learning monsters exist that's kept him from crawling back to his old ways, when things were simple, comfortable. Maybe it's the promise he made to Nance.

Because he cares now. Cares about Nancy still—always will, he loves her after all. But he cares about more now. Cares about the kids, and even...even Jonathan, much to Steve's ever persistent confusion. Because he likes his friends now, and for all the shit between the two of them revolving around Nancy, he likes Jonathan too. Jonathan asks him how he's doing sometimes, and aside from Nancy, nobody asks him that just out of the blue. Like Jonathan Byers is a good guy underneath all that awkward glower and Beatles vibe he's got going on.

The truth is, Steve has more people that care about him than he's had in a long time. And they're pretty much all in this house, focused on Will Byers. The kid who might, probably very likely will, die.

So why does part of him just want to up and leave? Why do his fingers itch for the bat, want to hit something?

Steve's not an angry guy, but he's been angry lately. And he doesn't know where to expel the energy. He's been *huffy* even, and that's just not healthy, you know?

A handful of hours later he gets his answer in Billy Hargrove and it's easy to let it all out when the asshole has his hands on Lucas. Easy to throw the second punch instead of grabbing Billy to throw him out after dodging his fist, because if Steve's being honest, he's been wanting to hit this smug prick since he first laid eyes on him. And nobody fucking touches the kids. He made a promise. And besides, he kind of likes the little shitstains, sue him.

Steve used to be this guy, and maybe that's why hitting him feels so good. Maybe that's why getting the shit beat out of him in return feels so bad.

The rest of the night is a blur. A painful one. Feels kind of like someone stuck a rolled up sock up through his nose and into his brain and he spends all night like that.

In the back of Billy's Camaro speeding like hell almost into a ditch, in the tunnels, in all the rest of their monster hunting filled night and well into dawn, when he finally limped upstairs in his own house to collapse on his bed.

Steve would say he feels pretty great once all is said and done. Even though his face hurts. Even though his heart hurts worse.

He kept the kids alive.

He feels pretty great. Yeah.

ii. been here before

Steve wakes up in his own bed.

It's disorienting, because he remembers falling asleep here, but not right side up and under the covers. Doesn't remember changing into pajamas.

His head feels fuzzy and his vision is blurry. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Steve sits up in bed. He feels fine and then he doesn't.

He turns away and bends at the waist and throws up nothing but spit onto his carpet, groaning. His head feels ready to explode.

The night before hits him all at once; the demodogs, the labs, the Byers house, Nancy and Jonathan and that girl Eleven, and *Billy*.

"Oh god. Oh, my god." He shoots up and scrambles for the bathroom, vomits again in the toilet. He feels like absolute shit. Maybe he has a concussion?

"Jesus," he moans, hauling himself up by grabbing the edge of his sink. He needs to get a good look at the damage. At what Billy Hargrove did to him. If the guy gave him a concussion, Steve doesn't know what he'll do first. Probably ask Nancy to drive him to the hospital. But after? Call Hop, maybe? No. Get even? It sounds enticing but no. Lay in bed and eat and heal? Probably for the best.

Steve grits his teeth and looks up into the mirror and sees...nothing.

He looks great. Not a bruise or cut or wayward curl of drool on his chin in sight. He won't even need to style his hair, it just looks good.

Confused, he runs his fingers over his face, poking and prodding and pulling and pushing the skin of his nose and cheeks every which way and feels nothing but normal. No aches or pain or sting. No caked blood he remembers ignoring last night he was so exhausted.

Just a case of chapped lips and particularly parched throat. He runs the sink and scoops handfuls of frozen-pipes-cold water into his mouth, mind whirling. Trying to make sense. Because none of it *makes any fucking sense*.

Steve showers and gets dressed, hoping he'll realize last night was all some wild dream or something. But it's not, it can't be. Last night *happened*.

So the first thing he does when he gets downstairs is flip open the phone book. Finds the Henderson's number and dials it, trying to focus and will himself not to freak out like he very much wants to.

It picks up on the second ring, and thankfully it's Dustin who answers.

"Hello?"

"Hey, kid," Steve starts in. "I wanted to ask—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Dustin cuts in, and Steve can picture him waving his hand around. "Who's calling?"

Steve holds the phone a little tighter. "It's...it's me, man." To the silence he adds, "Steve? You know, Steve Harrington?"

It's not even been twelve hours, come on.

There's an anxious kind of hum as Dustin decides. Decides what, Steve has no idea. He thought they got over this literally the second they left the Wheeler's house.

"Dustin, what gives? Come on, man. I have some questions about the —the Upside Down and—"

Dustin shouts something indistinguishable that has him holding the phone away from his ear.

"Steve! You can't just say that. God. Meet me in front of the arcade in twenty minutes."

"You can't drive, dumbass."

"Then pick me up, obviously!" Dustin demands. "Over and out!"

The line cuts and Steve swears.

-

"Dustin," Steve says when he's standing on the sidewalk outside the Henderson house. "What's with the hockey getup?"

Dustin looks up and down the street, hockey stick in hand, and bounds down the drive to grab at Steve's arm.

"So, funny story. I need your help. It's of the highest urgency."

Can this town not have an emergency every twenty-four hours?

"Wait, what? Already?"

They stare at each other. "You said you have questions. Well, currently I actually have a huge problem. So if you would be so kind as to help me? Maybe?"

"What?"

Dustin groans and lowers his voice. "I was on my way to ask Nancy to take care of it. But you called, so I guess you'll do. You still have that bat, right?"

"Hey, wait." This sounds familiar. "Don't tell me, you have a pet problem?"

Dustin freezes, looking surprised then immediately suspicious.

"Specifically in your storm shelter?"

Dustin narrows his eyes. "...Yes."

Something definitely isn't right. This shouldn't be happening because it already happened. Steve swallows and taps his fingers on the roof of his car.

"Okay, let me grab my bat."

Dustin's eyes light up like it's Christmas.

-

Steve hauls ass. It's really the only way to describe it.

He jumps down the steps two at a time, and he drags Dustin down with him. He avoids the wet slop of monster skin on the cement in favor of pointing his bat at the hole in the brick.

"It's tunneling," Steve informs him. Because they already figured this out. "Underneath the pumpkin patch. They have a nest. It's like a whole thing."

"How do you know that?" he demands, hurrying to peer into the dugout.

"Kid, you seriously don't remember any of this? What is this, the Twilight Zone?"

"What are you talking about? I haven't told you about any of this because we *don't hang out*. I haven't told anybody!"

Steve chews at his lip, thinking.

"Will you answer my questions now?" he asks, feeling his heart rate pick up.

"But Steve, we have to find him first!" Dustin cries. "What if he," he says, looking around, "*Eats something bigger?*"

He sighs. "Dart can wait, Dustin."

"How do you know his name?"

-

They're sitting at Dustin's dining table, looking over playbooks for Dungeons and Dragons and other nerdy shit Steve doesn't care about. It's all gibberish as far as he's concerned.

"You're not listening, Dustin. I'm saying this is the second time I've done this. All of it."

"Will never told us about anything like time loops. Or time *warps*, wow. Oh, my god. Oh, my god, *Steve*, we have to tell the others. Do you even know the possibilities of a potential rip in space-time? The Party's got to know about this!"

"No, no, no, no. No they don't. Maybe it's just like, *deja vu*? Or something?"

It's not. It sure doesn't feel like it. Steve can still feel how many punches he took, the ghost of them. He can't feel the pain now, sure, but he can still remember it so clearly. He's never had a dream like that. Like this.

Dustin deflates. "Maybe you had a vision or something. You know, if El was still around, I bet—"

"Kid," Steve says, "maybe let's just chalk it up to *deja vu*. Let's drop it, okay?"

He laughs, a little wary of the whole thing. "I don't know. I definitely think if you got in a fight with Max's older brother we'd be able to tell. Right?"

And Steve laughs a little too, because he feels kind of stupid now. It's ridiculous, living the same day twice? That doesn't happen.

"Right," Steve says. Adds, "Let's go find Dart."

-

Steve doesn't tell anybody.

He doesn't tell anybody even when he's standing over Nancy's

shoulder, watching her comfort a terrified Jonathan. Again. And Steve knows he's been here before. Just yesterday.

He sees the girl he loves trying to soothe the grief Jonathan is trying to put off, maybe. And Steve still says nothing, because in his maybe-not-a-dream Will Byers beats the Mindflayer possessing him and lives. But right now, Steve doesn't know how to tell them that without sounding crazy.

And worse, what if he's wrong?

So he doesn't tell anybody when El shows up with a bloody nose and leaves again with Hopper.

He doesn't tell anybody even when the kids duck down in time for Billy to get out of the Camaro, and Steve knows, at least, maybe he can make this part a little different. A little less painful.

Steve doesn't give him a chance to get inside the house. The second Billy lifts the cigarette from his mouth to point at the window, Steve accepts this is just the second time he's had to deal with this, no big deal, and is the one pushing Billy to the ground instead. He can turn this around in his favor this time.

Billy just sort of sits there in the driveway, looking shocked and *intrigued* and it's a dangerous thing to pique Billy's interest. Because from all he's seen of Billy at school, Steve knows he doesn't let up on the things he finds interesting.

Steve's been at the end of Billy's interest since he came to town. He knows what it's like.

"King Steve!" Billy howls at the sky, to Steve standing over him. He fists his hands in the gravel and sits up straighter. "Still got some fire in you after all, huh?"

"Go home, Billy. We have something we need to get done tonight and you don't want to be involved."

It's not the right thing to say.

Billy doesn't stand, but he does swipe at Steve's legs. It sends him

crashing to the ground and then Billy is crouching over him, fists swinging in like the night before. Maybe Steve didn't save himself as much trouble as he thought he might.

iii. what happened next

Steve wakes up in his own bed and he does not throw up on the floor. He covers his mouth when he realizes he's nauseous again and throws up all over his hands.

"Oh, my *god*," he whispers, mortified with himself.

He goes into autopilot, running through the day like he did the first time. And the thing is, he doesn't even *try*. He just gets thrust into the same situations until he's trailing Dustin and Lucas and Max from a junkyard to walk down train tracks and out of the woods and arrive in front of Hawkins lab.

He finds himself back in the Byers house and feels like he's gonna be sick again, so he turns away, heads into the kitchen before Hopper's even finished laying Will out on the couch. He can hear Nancy whisper soothing nothings, soothing *some things* to Jonathan and that twists his stomach too. But he can't hold out for long, ends up turning around to see how Jonathan's shoulders relax just the tiniest bit.

He tacks up sheets and scrap to block all the light out in the Byers' shed and ignores Nancy when she tries to help him. Because he's mad, alright? He's sick of it.

He gets mad about the whole situation they've been forced into. Gets fierce, feels protective—too protective—when she mentions the kids, says how he's done a good job watching over them and he doesn't take back the way he says, "Yeah, well, somebody fucking has to. Since you and everybody else doesn't do shit to watch out for them."

Steve doesn't turn to see the hurt he knows will be there in her eyes.

When he meets Billy outside, he doesn't even bother trying to explain. Just lets Billy inside to whoop and holler and accuse and tease and mock because for some reason Steve throws the first punch this time, and then Billy doesn't laugh anymore. He just finds the nearest breakable *anything*, grabs it, and cracks it over Steve's head.

When Steve's on his back, it's Billy who grabs the syringe and sticks it in Steve's neck.

How'd Billy know where to find it?

iv. dog at my heels

Steve wakes up in his own bed and he does not throw up on his hands. Instead, he sits up and dribbles bile down the front of his shirt.

"Gross," he mumbles, not even bothering to open his eyes yet. Wonders if this is what it feels like to be dead. To be drugged into oblivion by shady Hawkins lab bullshit.

He goes and showers and runs a load of laundry.

He flips open his phone book to H and finds Dustin's number. He calls.

Dustin answers and asks who's calling and Steve hangs up without answering.

He drives by himself to the pumpkin patch and finds Hopper's truck there and says, "Fuck me." Because he's been here before. Because it's definitely not a dream.

He's going to have to see Nancy tonight. He's going to have to fight Billy. And he's going to have to go down into the tunnels.

He gets back in his car and drives to pick up Dustin.

-

They're sitting at the diner getting breakfast when Dustin hums.

"That sounds like an *I got it* hum," Steve says, hopeful.

"No, the bacon is just good."

"Christ, kid."

"I think we need to ask Will."

"Did you not just hear the whole part where I said Will *isn't* Will right now? I can't exactly break into the labs right now anyway."

"That doesn't happen until?"

"Later," he says. He doesn't know for sure, timelines are getting mixed up. "It was definitely night."

"Tonight or tomorrow?"

"I don't know. It's all one big blur in my head."

"Not helpful, Steve."

"Yeah, you think I don't know that?"

"Let's go get Lucas and Max then, at least?"

Steve sighs, eats another piece of bacon. Because it is really good, the kid's got a point. Why not savor the simple things if he's going to be living the same day over and over again.

"Sounds good."

-

He parks in front of the Hargrove house, Lucas and Dustin already in the backseat. He turns the key and sits there, watching to see if any Billy shaped shadows pass by the windows.

"I'll be back in a second."

"Careful," Lucas warns, serious.

Steve climbs out and sticks his hands in his pockets as he walks up the drive. It's a few cracked steps and a weathered door, paint peeling in stripes near the bottom almost like a dog got to it at some point. He knocks and holds his breath.

Billy answers because of course he does.

His blue eyes narrow, dangerous. It's the look he gave Steve before he shoved him to the ground.

"Got a good reason you're at my door, Harrington?" he asks, all steel. "You're a little late to trick-or-treat, hate to break it to you."

"Not here for candy," Steve says, tired from simply existing on the same plane as Billy. "Just picking up your sister because the dweebs had something planned, I guess?"

Billy appraises him a while longer. Steps outside, into Steve's personal bubble so that he's forced to take one step off the front landing. Billy shuts the door so quiet, it's hard to hear it catch.

"Max isn't here," Billy says, slow. "Her window was...open."

"Oh."

Billy looks at him again, eyes flitting around Steve's face like he's looking for something.

"See something you like, Billy?"

"I thought I—" he starts, then tapers into a raspy laugh. "Man, you wouldn't believe the dream I fucking had last night. Beat you halfway to hell and now here you are? Funny is all."

Steve can't say anything to that. Because Steve's been beaten bloody by Billy every day for days now and he's woken up same as he ever was.

Billy's eyebrows waver, pulling up like he's not so sure. "Right, Harrington? It's funny. Isn't it?"

"Yeah," Steve says, and it's a whisper because he *can* believe it, and it's not fucking funny. "Real funny."

Billy's mouth wobbles next. "Here you are, still pretty boy, King Steve. Even after I—"

"Billy."

He sees Billy's throat work, like he's swallowing down words he wants to say.

"Billy?"

"Huh?" he asks, snapping back to the moment. "What?"

And something's changed just now. Billy straightens up, his brow shooting down into anger and out of uncertainty, suddenly all vitriol as he shoves at Steve's chest, abrupt and staggering. Steve trips and falls down the stairs, lands on his side enough to force the wind from his lungs.

"The fuck you want my sister for?"

Steve points at the car with the kids because he can't even speak right now if he wanted.

Billy climbs on top of him, and his fists hover, poised to strike heavy and hard like Steve knows, intimately, how he likes to hit. They waver there in the air, unsure.

Steve looks from the fist he knows is about to be streaked in his own blood to Billy's eyes, wide and frightened.

"Billy, I remember too. We've done this before—"

And then they're fighting, all over again.

v. it's not fair

Steve swallows down the bile rising to his throat when he wakes up and goes straight to the phone book, swiping a change of clothes on his way out. Tugs his jeans on while he waits for the line to connect.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mrs. Wheeler. I was wondering if I could speak with Nancy?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey. She's been out. Want me to take a message for you?"

"No, no. That's alright."

They say their goodbyes and hang up and Steve wants to go back to bed.

Instead, he calls Dustin next. Tells him that under no uncertain terms is he to leave his house for the day. The next two days, just to be safe. Then he calls the Sinclair home and tells Lucas the same. They both agree, because even after fighting monsters, they still fear the wrath of whatever an adult, nevermind someone four years older than them, will impose upon them. Like threatening no rides to the arcade for a month.

He finds the Hargrove number easily enough. Traces a finger over it, thinking it would be easy to call. Easy to warn Max away. But it's not like Max will have a reason to go sneaking around and getting herself in trouble if Lucas and Dustin are on lockdown.

He imagines how it would be if Billy picked up. If they could have a normal conversation for once.

If they could talk about whatever recognition Steve saw in Billy's eyes the day before.

Steve knows it's not just happening to him, whatever it is that's

happening. It's comforting the same way it's terrifying, because he still doesn't understand it. Still doesn't know if it's some Upside Down, Mindflayer thing he can't grasp. Some new kind of evil.

So far, it's just him and Billy, he *thinks*, that are stuck in this godforsaken time loop. He'd rather not risk it spreading to anybody else.

So, he hangs the phone up and runs a hand through his hair, grabs a banana, and plans the route to Hawkins lab out in his head.

-

He waits and waits and then finally, it's dark and he sees Jonathan's car pull up to the gate.

Nancy climbs out first, mouth open as she waves an arm at him.

"What are *you* doing here?" she calls even as he walks to them.

"Listen, have we done this before?" he asks, wasting no time.

Nancy stares at him in the headlights, at a loss.

Jonathan looks between the two of them. "Hey man, what're you talking about?"

"Have we—" Steve tries again, holding an arm out. "Have we been here, *exactly* here, before? Like a repeat? But instead, last time I had Dustin, Lucas, and Max with me?"

Nancy purses her lips. "Steve. I don't know what you're talking about. But you should head home. We got this covered."

And Steve just looks at her. Looks at her like he hasn't been able to, hasn't *wanted* to, in a while now. It's been hardly any time at all but it's felt like years. Maybe it's the expectation of living through this day again, but right now, this moment, it feels fleeting.

Steve switches his gaze to Jonathan's anxious hands. They lie flat on the car, inching toward Nancy like it hurts not to be near her, to touch her. He gets that.

He nods, takes a step back. His eyes are wet and he hates that this is happening *now*. He's fucking stupid.

"Steve?" Nancy asks again, taking a step toward him.

He shakes his head. "Just—are you happy, Nance?"

"What?"

"Are you—are you two *happy*?"

"Steve," she sighs, in that pointed way he's come to be so familiar with. Sad and sighing and all exasperated breath.

"I mean it. Are you and Jonathan happy? For real?"

He sees her lips twist over each other. "Not bullshit?" she asks, and it's painful. A little ashamed.

Steve doesn't want her to feel ashamed. Because he feels that plenty enough for both of them these days, and it's not a good feeling, and he loves her still, sure, but holding anything against Nancy has never been in him. He wants her to be happy. He doesn't want her to be like him.

She never was, anyway.

"Not bullshit," Steve agrees.

Jonathan is *staring* at him. Probably picking him apart in exactly the way Steve doesn't know how to do to someone else. Maybe that was a problem with him and Nancy too. He didn't know. Didn't get it, maybe.

Didn't get *her*.

She smiles, soft beneath shining eyes. "I am happy, Steve."

It hurts to hear it out loud, to have it confirmed. But he suspected that much, at least.

"Good," he tells her, and means it. To Jonathan he says, because he

knows he'll be the only one to remember after tonight, probably, "You take good fucking care of her, okay?"

Jonathan's jaw goes tight as he nods. And he knows Jonathan means it. Jonathan's just an honest kind of guy. More loyal than most. And of anyone in the town that Nancy could want, Steve's glad it's Jonathan.

Then he turns, gets back into his car, and drives back the way he came.

Without Max missing tonight, he knows they don't need him there for what's next.

vi. not so new so new so new

Steve blinks awake to knocking and knows it's different than the days before. He feels less sick but his head hurts and he wonders if maybe he broke whatever time loop warp spell *curse* he's been having to suffer through.

He gets to the kitchen sink before he vomits and it's a blessing and curse because suddenly everything is so *loud*, especially the knocking. He needs a shower. He feels hungover. He knows he didn't break shit.

The knocking goes from loud to almost violent and Steve tries to focus on his sick stomach. The feeling churns and bubbles and then he's throwing up, again, down the front of his shirt, *again*, and he's about fucking had it, okay?

Steve tugs his shirt over his head without bothering to look at the mess and tosses it in the sink. He'll just throw it out, or do it all over again tomorrow. What's the point of laundry?

He ambles to the front door and yanks it open mid-knock. His fears are confirmed when he sees that it's Billy.

"You know then?" Steve asks him, staring him down.

Billy's eyes shift between his face, his shirtlessness, and then back to his eyes.

"Yeah. You gonna let me in or what?"

Steve steps aside but it doesn't mean much when Billy barrels through his outstretched arm anyway.

"This is fucked, Harrington."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Billy scratches at his scalp, trails his hand down to rub over his mouth.

"This is fucked."

"Say something else, Billy. Use your words."

"Fuck off," he mutters, but it's thoughtful, aimed at his chest. He shakes his head. "And put on some clothes. It's like thirty degrees."

"Forty-seven, but it'll be sunny later anyway." Then, "But you know that."

Billy rolls his eyes. "How many days has it been for you? I keep fucking—fucking waking up in bed and living the same goddamn day. Over and over again. It's been like what, I don't know? A week?"

"Just about," Steve confirms. He walks to his fridge and finds the carton of eggs and the sliced ham. He pulls both out with the butter and grabs a frying pan. "One or two eggs?"

Billy doesn't say anything so Steve turns and repeats the question.

"Harrington. This is serious fucking shit right now and you're making breakfast?"

Steve shrugs and cracks the eggs over a pad of butter. "Two each then. Nothing I've done changes what happens, so what's the point? I

might as well leave with a full stomach for once."

"And what is it?" Billy asks, suddenly much closer. Steve sees him making a face at his filthy shirt in the sink. "What is it that happens? Because I can't get a word out of Maxine for shit, and, Jesus—why's this smell like sewer?"

"Don't—don't touch that. It's none of your business. Sit down and wait for your food."

Billy groans and pinches his nose. Checks Steve on the shoulder as he rounds to the other side of him, elbow propped up and hip jutting out.

"It's not that Max won't tell you, it's that she can't. She was let in on the secret and it's like, government sealed shit. That sort of thing." Billy snorts. "I'm serious, man. Me. Nance and Jonathan, the whole Byers family. The kids. Max too, now. And you I guess? We signed papers."

"And what the hell happens if you break your little government promise?"

"Get sniped?" Billy has the decency to look a little taken aback by that. "I don't know, honestly. Just know it's serious shit and it's *real* and it means a lot of people could die if we mess it up. But we don't really *do* that. We survive this shit, and we beat it. So, I guess it's a moot point."

"I don't know. This all sounds..."

"Insane? Trust me, you gotta see it first. If I didn't see it I never would have bought in to any of it."

"Saw *what*, Harrington? I remember walking into a madhouse, all those papers on the walls and floor and furniture? I heard about how batty the Byers were but, I mean, seriously? You're talking like you've seen some shit."

"You know how sharks have a lot of teeth?" Steve asks him, breaking two more eggs and flipping the first.

"Yeah, sure."

"And I'm going to assume you know what a dog looks like, right?"

"Yeah, Harrington. I'm not stupid."

Steve throws him a look and Billy flips him off.

"Well, picture a slimy, flower faced dog with no eyes and a whole lot of shark teeth and that's what happens. Happens tonight anyway. The thing I saw last year was tall, like a human. Taller than me."

Steve hears Billy's fingers tap fast on the counter. "And what happened to the big one?"

"Nance emptied a clip into it. I hit it with my bat—the one Max used that night, you remember? And Jonathan lit it on fire."

"Man," Billy huffs, trying to sound unbothered. "What a way to go, huh?"

"Oh, that didn't kill it."

All the air rushes out of him at that, ending in a scoff. "Then what *did*?"

"This kid, she's got a whole story. But she killed it." Steve put the ham in the pan. "But there's more. There's always more."

"Like what?"

"Like the dogs. A hell of a lot of dogs."

Billy doesn't say a damn word. Doesn't say anything again until Steve is plating their food.

Billy accepts it with a limp bend of his elbow, and follows Steve to the dining table.

-

"You said before you beat this," Billy says, poking at his food. "Tonight?"

"The first night, I lived through to the end of it. Then I woke up the next day, only it wasn't the next day, it was the day before. Or two days before? Everything's a jumble, I don't know. I just know that we close the gate and we kill these things and it was *over*."

Steve looks up and sees Billy staring at him, and realizes he'd been just short of shouting.

"Christ, listen," Steve says, running both hands through his hair. He tugs on it a little and leans back in his chair. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"Maxine stuck me with that fucking needle and I—I woke up. Went through the whole day in a haze, like I'd done it before."

"Okay, and when did you catch on you weren't dreaming or whatever?"

Billy drops his fork and leans forward, jabbing the space between them with a finger.

"When you pushed me first. I thought, about fucking time something turned out different. But then, the next time...I didn't remember anything until I grabbed the needle because I knew where to find it. I just knew where it was in the house."

Steve remembers that too, remembers the plunge of it in his neck. "What happened to make you go to sleep that night?"

"Sleep?"

"I only wake up on the same day if I get knocked out. By you, or I'm so tired I pass out."

Billy's staring at him. "Max."

"Huh?"

"Maxine, she...after I knocked you out with those drugs. She got me with the bat."

"Jesus Christ."

"I don't remember it," Billy mutters, but Steve can see he might remember more than he's saying. "Have you tried staying awake?"

"Like, not sleeping?"

"Yeah, just powering through the night? To see what happens?"

Steve shrugs. "Not yet. But then, this is the first day something like this has happened." He points at Billy's chest. "I don't know what's supposed to happen now that you know."

"I fucking tag along, maybe? Get this shit done and over with so we can move on with our lives."

Steve laughs. "You want to go monster killing?"

Billy shrugs, the ghost of a smile on his face. "Why not? If you can do it I sure as hell can."

"You're unbelievable, Billy."

"Bet you I even kill one."

He sniffs at that. "Fine. What are we betting?"

Billy forks a piece of ham and waves it around. "You leave me the hell alone."

"What? That's all I ever try to do. You're always on my ass at school, and I barely even look at you, man."

"You give me the school. No more King Steve."

Steve can't believe what he's hearing. "I'm *not*, like you're constantly reminding me. But fine, if this gets you off my back, I'm in."

"Oh no," Billy tells him, "You have to decide what you get if I lose."

"You mean if you don't kill one?"

"If they're even real, sure." And there it is. The disbelief.

"Fine. How about, I don't know. Ten bucks?"

"Harrington, you have no imagination."

"Fine then, buy me gas for a week."

"I know you have money for gas, asshole. Ask for something wild."

Steve throws his hands up. He stands, grabbing their plates to put in the sink.

"Why don't you just pick something if you're so dead set on this bullshit bet? I really couldn't care less."

He hears Billy hum behind him as he washes up.

"A kiss."

Steve drops the plate in the sink

"*What?*"

"It has to be something totally ridiculous, something as stupid as monsters being real. Because I'm obviously going to win."

Steve knows Billy won't win, the bastards are hard to kill. He doesn't want to kiss Billy. He doesn't even want to be around Billy. Billy's...*Billy*.

"No."

"Why?" And Billy sounds so much closer all of a sudden. Steve jumps when he feels hot breath on his neck. "You worried you're a queer and just don't know it yet?"

"Ha ha. Have you ever tried not being a piece of shit?"

"Nope."

"I should have known."

"So agree to the deal. I'm going to win and you won't have to worry about it anyway. Besides, monsters aren't real. You just had my sister in a fucking funhouse and I want—"

"Billy, your logic is a hundred percent flawed. Do you even hear yourself? You think you'll kill a monster you don't believe in so you...can kiss me?" Steve shakes his head and pushes his shoulder against Billy's chest to shove him back a step. He doesn't let up. "If anybody's discovering themselves today, it's not gonna be me."

He looks over his shoulder because Billy *won't move* and he's tired of the roundabout conversation they're having. Billy blinks at him, lips pursed like Nancy's always get when she's mad. It looks out of place on Billy's face.

"I don't wanna kiss you, Harrington."

"I'm the one asking for a tenner, not a kiss, man. Figure your own shit out, maybe?"

"I'm no fag."

"Again, I didn't—"

Billy shoves him hard into the counter and Steve shoves back. His side hurts, his stomach still kind of feels gross, and he has a headache and almost all of it is due to one annoying, aggressive Billy Hargrove.

For an instant, Billy looks like he did that first night and Steve knows they're about a minute out from throwing real punches to draw real blood. And he'd rather not be hit over the head with the plate he just served Billy breakfast on. There's a kind of irony there he's not willing to satisfy.

Steve huffs and pushes with everything he has until Billy is an arm's length away. He plants a hand on Billy's chest, a mirror of that night, and wills him to just *stop*.

"Billy!" he urges. "So fucking what?"

It halts the would-be fight for a second. "So what, what?"

"So what if you are? I don't actually care about that shit, you know that right? I really don't have a problem if you're queer or gay or—not gay? I don't care, man. Do what you fucking want, pay me ten bucks or not, because you won't win. You'll die losing against these

things, Billy. And trust me, you don't want to try and win against them. I've tried."

Billy sways on his feet, eyes flickering so fast over Steve's face, he wonders if he's getting dizzy.

"You're still alive, must not have tried hard enough."

Steve pushes at him, at the warm skin permeating through Billy's shirt. "I got lucky, that's all. I'm telling you, man. You want to wait out and see what lives beneath Hawkins, then fine, great. But let's get a few things straight first."

The energy pouring off him is still all fire so Steve forges on. "One; you don't touch the kids. You leave them alone. Lucas is a good kid and cares about your sister, and the quicker you get over yourself about that the better. Two; you don't touch me, don't lay a goddamn finger on me. I'm kind of tired of being beat to hell every day. Three; you do this, you join the group in fighting these things...you learn real quick how to be a team player."

"Harrington, I *am* a team player—"

"You're good at throwing hoops, so what? I mean, one of these things goes for one of ours, you try to save them. You don't charge ahead and try to be a hero either."

"Because I'll get killed?"

"Because you wouldn't be the only one who dies tonight," Steve murmurs, final.

Billy winds his fingers at the throat of his shirt and Steve holds his ground. Even when Billy yanks him close, close enough to feel the rush of Billy's shuddery breath. And Steve wonders if Billy's always wanted to kiss him, or if he's just fucking with him. If he's angry because he has a crush, or he's a piece of shit for the sake of being a piece of shit.

Maybe it's a mix of both, he figures.

"You're...you're serious, Harrington?" Billy asks him, so quiet. His

voice drops off and he looks at Steve's mouth and he doesn't look away. Steve can't help licking his lips, remembering how he's woken up with chapped lips every morning so far.

"Stick around," Steve tells him. Billy lets his hand slip out of the death grip he has on his shirt. He takes a step back, dragging his eyes back to Steve's. "See for yourself what happens."

And Billy just...backs up. Gives Steve exactly what he's been hoping for.

"You better be fucking right."

Steve wants to tell him he shouldn't want to be proved right, but then, it's just Billy. Why should he care?

-

"Steve are you *kidding* me right now?" Dustin whispers at him when he sees Billy standing by the Bimmer, waiting. "That's Max's crazy older brother! He tried to kill us!"

Steve lifts a hand. "It's a long story, but he's been clued in."

"On the Upside Down? Or?"

"What do you think, dumbass?"

Dustin glares at him. "Well, I don't have all day. Lay it on me."

So Steve sighs, looking Dustin from head to toe, taking in the hockey goalkeeper gear and the stick and wonders who he pissed off to get stuck in this situation.

"So, listen."

-

"I don't see how some hole in the wall is supposed to convince me," Billy tells them, deadpan as he swings a flashlight in the tunnel. He's still wiping his hand on his jeans.

"You're the one who stuck your finger in that pile of goop like an idiot," Dustin mutters under his breath. "You don't know what that skin can do if it comes in contact with human flesh!"

Steve reminds him, "Kid, you've been taking care of it all week."

"That's irrelevant," Dustin insists. He straightens when Billy does, meeting the glare he's sent with one of his own. "Steve, I don't trust this guy."

"Too bad, pipsqueak."

"Dustin, you trust *me*, right?" Steve asks, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah, I guess. But—"

"Then shut up. Everybody just shut the hell up and help me grab some buckets. We gotta fill them with meat and then we can track this sucker down."

Billy makes a face. "Meat?"

-

"I don't see how this is cutting down on time, Harrington," Billy gripes. He slings two handfuls of raw meat on the train tracks at a time and Steve wants to say he's wasting their supply. He's going wrist deep in his yellow gloves with every handful.

"You're the one who suggested we wait it out. See how things play out. These are the steps I took the first time, so I think we should follow them."

Dustin walks a little ahead of them, head tilted down and shoulders a little too unmoving for Steve to think he isn't trying his hardest to listen in. He hadn't told Dustin everything like he had the first time he relived today.

Billy grunts and slops down two more handfuls, right in Steve's path. "The kid doesn't know that. We can just skip all this."

Steve shushes him, leans in close enough so Billy can hear him at a whisper.

"Man, I swear to god. I already told you, I don't know if me telling anybody who will listen about what's happening is somehow making this whole crazy situation *worse*. I already didn't want to tell you, but you didn't really give me a choice."

"Hey," he snips. "It's not like I fucking asked for this, okay? It's all bullshit if you ask me."

He thinks of Nancy and says, "Get in line."

Billy elbows him and Steve elbows back.

"Will you two *stop* it!" Dustin calls back, turning around to stare them down. "You're both acting like children."

"No, we're not," he and Billy say at once and Steve shoves him to make a point.

Dustin rolls his eyes so hard, his whole body turns with it. He keeps walking. "I'm changing the subject!"

"To what, Legos?" Billy mutters. Steve huffs a laugh.

Steve knows what comes next so he says, "Maybe he wants girl advice."

It stops Dustin dead in his tracks. He whips around, locking eyes with Steve with a shake of his head.

"What?"

He looks to Billy. "Not with *him* here."

Oh, right. Max.

"I don't know, man. Billy's good with the ladies. If anybody can give advice, he can."

Billy slams down the next handful of meat a little too close to his

shoes. Steve sends down a handful of his own and Billy *growls* under his breath.

"What do you wanna know, dipshit?" Billy grunts, all reluctant.

Steve can see Dustin wrestle with it, with what he wants to ask. Like he can't contain it.

"Come on, kid," Billy prompts. "You wanna know how to fuck a girl or take her out? I don't got all day."

"Jesus, he's a kid, Billy—"

"No!" Dustin yelps, making a face. "I just—I had a plan to get this one girl to like me and it's not working."

"What'd you do wrong?"

"I showed her Dart, and—"

"Girls don't want to see fucking slugs, kid."

"He's not just a slug, he's an interdimensional—"

"Does it sound like I care?"

Dustin throws a piece of meat down. "Not everybody has a perfect goddamn *mullet*, alright?"

"Okay, okay. Like I said last time—" Steve starts, realizing Dustin doesn't know this isn't the first time they've had this conversation. "Like I've told people before, it's not about the hair, or the looks, or whatever."

"Then what is it about, Steve?"

"Yeah, Harrington," Billy says. "Enlighten us. Because so far my hair and my ass have gotten me plenty far in romance." And he runs his tongue over his lips like he doesn't know chapstick exists.

Ignoring him, Steve says, "You're trying way too hard. Girls don't like all that science stuff all the time, right? The key with girls is acting

like you don't care."

"Even if you do?"

"Yeah, it drives them—"

"Harrington, that is the biggest crock of bullshit I've ever heard in my life."

On second thought, maybe they should have skipped all this. Then he'd have been spared Billy's input on this conversation.

"What? Like you don't act all aloof to get with a girl?"

"Sure I do. But when you love somebody you can't pull that shit. You want someone to stick around you can't pretend nothing matters."

"Whoa, whoa, who said anything about love?" Steve asks, horrified at the words coming out of Billy Hargrove's mouth. He didn't know the asshole could even say the word, *love*.

"The kid's obviously got it bad. His voice gets all high and—"

"It does not!"

"Look, man," Steve tells Billy, "Dustin isn't in love with this girl." He looks at Dustin, pointing. "Right?"

Dustin's gone red in the face and he's blinking too fast. "No! No, I... 'Course not."

"Good," Steve echoes. "Don't. You'll just get hurt and you're too young for all that."

Dustin hangs his head, keeps walking ahead.

Steve starts to fall in line when a hand slaps him on the chest, holding him back.

"What the hell are you telling him that for?"

"Uh, because it's true? Kid his age doesn't need to know what a broken heart feels like."

Billy's hand morphs from a palm to a finger prodding his sternum. "That's bullshit too, and you know it. Just 'cuz Wheeler tore you up doesn't mean this kid's eyeing a girl that'll do the same. He's gotta figure it out for himself."

Steve almost, desperately, wants to tell Billy exactly who the girl in question is. But he won't. He can't. Billy would probably kill Dustin and he does not want to factor that into the agenda for today.

And it stings to hear. Hurts like Nancy saying she's happier with Jonathan than she was with Steve hurts and god, does it still hurt.

Steve pushes forward, testing Billy's hand on him. He pushes back, digging into his shirt with a beef-blood stained glove.

"Careful, Hargrove. You might sound insightful."

He gives him a mean little grin. "That'd be just awful, wouldn't it? It's almost like I know what I'm talking about."

"I have a hard time believing you ever loved anybody who wasn't yourself," Steve scoffs, batting Billy's hand away to keep on walking. Billy falls into step with him.

"Why's it so hard to believe?" Billy asks him, asks the ground he's littering meat with. "I left a lot behind in California, you know."

"Like what?" Steve asks, because it feels like they've fallen into their own little world surrounded by Indiana autumn. Dustin's so far ahead now he can't possibly be trying to hear what they're saying. "Like a ton of girls?"

"Some."

And, because it feels like Billy's quiet because he's *thinking* and not because he's looking at Steve like he's about ready to kill him, Steve asks:

"Boys?"

Billy's gait stutters, but he keeps on. Grips the next piece of meat tight in a palm until it's minced through his fingers.

"One," Billy murmurs. He lets the piece fall to the ground. "Go on, call me a fucking queer fag, Harrington. I know you're dying to."

Steve doesn't. "Did you at least get to say goodbye before you left?"

He hears a little laugh leave Billy and it's a lot better than a punch to the teeth.

"No. Never told the guy a goddamn thing about it. About my problem."

And it's sad, Steve thinks.

"Girls are real easy, Harrington," Billy goes on, clearing his throat. "I know what they want, what they want to see when they look at me. It's so fucking easy getting in a girl's pants. You know how easy it is, right? Tommy's told me how much tail you got before you went all soft." He spits far into the leaves. "But guys...I don't know, man. It's knowing what they think and how they think about it without knowing a goddamn thing. I never know where I stand. Don't know what they see when they look at me. Sometimes they look afraid, but other times..."

Steve chances a look at Billy then, and sees Billy's already looking at him. He's stopped throwing meat down.

"Maybe if you stop constantly fighting, you'd know."

"Easier to be a threat than a target, Harrington. I'm no pussy."

"Man, I—"

"I don't need your excuses. Or your fucking Loch Nora pretty boy pity. Besides, I get off with girls all the time. I don't mind it. It's a fucking game, and I know how to make them feel like they're winning."

Steve bites the inside of his cheek. "You mean, you've never?"

"I don't need to," Billy answers. And it sounds so much different when he says, "I'm not a fag, Harrington."

Steve watches Billy watching him until he looks away. They fall into silence and Steve thinks it's so fucking *sad*. And it doesn't sit right, matching Billy with the word. Billy's angry. Billy's furious and violent and unstable. Billy isn't a person with emotions like everyone else. Billy isn't supposed to be like Steve.

Steve leans in and brushes Billy's shoulder with his own, and if he should ask, he'll blame it on a gust of wind.

-

When they reach the junkyard, Steve remembers. He grabs Billy's arm to hold him back.

"What the hell, man?"

"Remember what I told you," Steve says, low. "You leave the kids—"

Billy shrugs him off. "Yes, *sir*. I know how to play nice."

"Hm, do you though?"

Then Max and Lucas are shouting over to them—stopping when they see who's joined in on the fun.

-

"Are you *sure* he's not holding you guys hostage?" Max asks for the third time in a row, eyes hard on Steve's like she wants him to blink twice for yes and once for no.

"I promise, kid—"

"If I wanted to take anyone hostage, Maxine, I wouldn't bring them to meet with you." Billy flicks her head, walks over to the bus to start throwing sheet metal at the sides like Steve told them to. "I'd just throw them into the quarry and you'd never know!"

"Oh, my god," she says at the same time Lucas mutters, "Oh, my god."

Dustin is the one to get them off the topic and moving. They don't have much time.

-

It's dark and they're in the bus, holed up and waiting. Billy's decided sitting almost flush with him is the best route to take, so Steve's naturally noticed some differences.

For one, he's not thinking about Nancy like he had been the first time. Well not so much so.

Two, Dustin isn't in the body of the bus with them. He'd gotten antsy and followed Lucas and Max up not an hour in, to a chorus of annoyed *heys!* and thumps that sounded like playful shoving.

Steve can hear the kids talking about California and what it was like. Can hear Max tell the story of how she doesn't want to be so angry, and if Steve can hear it for a second time, it means Billy is hearing it for the first. He's strangely quiet, picking at the knee of his jeans.

"You're gonna make it worse," Steve mutters to him.

"What?"

"That frayed spot in your pants. You're gonna pick it into cutoffs by the end of the night."

Billy lets his hands fall to his sides, slapping his palms on the floor to push readjust where he's sitting. He catches half of Steve's hand on accident and jerks away like Steve pinched him.

"What's your deal?" Steve asks, more annoyed by Billy than worried about what's headed their way.

"Shut the fuck up, Harrington."

"Remember, Billy. Use your words—"

Billy's got a fist in his jacket in an instant, holding him close, tight, shaking him when Steve tries to pull back. All he manages to do is hit the back of his head on the bus, and he groans.

"Don't think just because the kids are here I won't hesitate to beat your ass."

"And what?" Steve snorts. "We do this all over again tomorrow? Besides, like I don't already know you don't care if the kids see."

Billy shoves him hard before retreating back to picking at his knee. Sulking.

"I shouldn't have to fucking care about them. About her."

"If you want to leave so badly then go, Billy. There's nothing stopping you."

Billy picks and picks and picks and huffs and pushes himself up. Stands over Steve like he might kick him again, just to prove he can.

"What're you gonna do, man? I'm not afraid of you."

"You should be, Harrington."

"Why?" Steve asks, standing to match him. Pushes into Billy's space because he's so *sick* of this guy. "Because you think you're some badass just because you don't give a shit if your sister lives or dies?"

Billy glares. Says so quiet, Steve knows it's just for him, "If Maxine died I'd at least be off the fucking hook. I could take off and never have to deal with any of this...any of *you* ever again."

Steve lets his eyes drag over Billy's face, his glower, the shake of his eyes.

"Wow. You're worse than shit. That's pathetic. That's just...you're just scum, Billy," Steve tells him, taking a step back. "Scum."

Some small sound leaves Billy. His hands shake into tight fists when Steve looks down at them. He really doesn't want to have their usual fight in the bus, of all places—

The howl of the demodogs rise and Steve almost feels relieved.

Billy jumps, snapping around toward the sound. "What the hell was that?"

Steve laughs lightly, picking up his bat. "Welcome to Hawkins, Billy."

-

The kids climb back inside and Steve stands under the hatch, bat up and ready. He can hear Billy breathing loud in the anxious quiet.

"Harrington—"

Steve shushes him and then the bus is rocking, bodies slamming into the sides like he remembers.

"Give me the goddamn bat. Let me do something," he hisses. Steve grips tighter.

Another howl and Steve swears, says, "Screw this," and climbs up. If he's going to hit something, it'll be keeping the beasts off the bus. He doesn't want to risk one slipping inside like it almost had last time.

As fast as he gets to his feet, he's hitting one off. It screeches, careening into the dark before landing with a wet thud. He yells and watches another leap up to face him. He hits that one off too. It feels good, feels good having his arms sing with the force.

Then the kids, then *Max* is screaming and Billy is shouting and Steve starts to pick out words.

"Harrington, get down here or give me that *goddamn* bat!"

Steve scrambles to duck inside and see what's happening. Sees the clawing arm and snapping petal jaws of a demodog inches from Maxine's arm. The metal's been pushed in, trapping her to the dashboard. He can see black blood seeping from sharp teeth and he—he meets Billy's frantic blue eyes, bright in the dark. And he's panicking and he's terrified, like they all are, and he cares, he must, because he catches the bat Steve tosses down to him and smashes the beast's arm until it's hanging broken and limp. The kids are screaming and Steve is shouting and Billy is silent as he hits the thing again and again.

Black blood spurts as the leg is pulled free, the beast whimpering as it tries to get away. And it's the wave again, the rush of the pack fleeing toward the labs that finally saves them. Steve's not looking forward to the rest of the night if this shit is already going sideways.

Steve doesn't know what to do if things go *wrong*. Things haven't gone so wrong yet. None of the kids have ever almost been hurt, and he's—he's scared. He's breathing too fast.

He rolls to the side and hangs his head over the bus, and throws up his breakfast.

While he does, he listens to Billy wrenching Max free with the help of the boys. Hears him asking her if she's okay, is she hurt, are you bleeding, you fucking idiot, I told you to stay behind me. Hears Max crying and swearing right back at him.

And Steve thinks, *scum*, thinks, *maybe not really so scummy*, thinks, *I'm never eating eggs and ham again*.

-

Billy pops up out of the hatch. Where Steve still lies on his stomach he sees the kids shuffle out of the bus, looking around cautiously. He wants to tell them they're good for now, but are they? Really? Maybe that's changed too. Maybe he can't protect them.

Billy says, "Hey," so Steve turns to him. "The bat's pretty nice when it's not being used on me."

He twirls it up into view and sets it in the space between them. Then he's crossing his arms to prop his chin on his hands.

"Jonathan made it," he says. He reaches over to feel the edge of a nail. "It comes in handy."

Billy doesn't say anything, but he looks like he wants to.

"So, you win that bet?" Steve asks.

"The night's not over yet, Harrington."

"So that's the deadline, huh? Was about to say, looks like you lost down there."

"I took its fucking arm off."

"You took the arm, not the head."

Billy's mouth parts, Steve can see his tongue working against his cheek.

"It's okay. If you lose, I mean," Steve says.

Billy shuts his mouth. "We'll fucking see." Then, "I don't have a ten on me, man."

Steve shrugs his shoulders, rolling onto his back to stare up at the sky. Count the stars and wonder how long they have before Will is speeding out of the labs. How long he has until he has to look at Nancy again.

"I don't care, Billy. Just help me keep these dweebs alive."

Billy just stays there and Steve can feel eyes on him, heavy and wondering but he doesn't want to see it. Doesn't want to see Billy's face or what's going on in his head. Doesn't want to *know*.

But he can't stay up here forever, ignoring his problems. Ignoring Billy and whatever it means, if he has some kind of crush on Steve or what. So he steels himself. When he looks back over, Billy's already gone back down.

He sighs and heads back in, expecting to see Billy already on his way out. But Billy's there, waiting, poised for something.

His hands find Steve's chest, splay warm and wide over his shirt, inching under his jacket and then Billy's leaning in. Steve can smell his cologne, can smell beast blood and inhales a little too sharp so that his nose burns when Billy gently presses his lips to Steve's.

It's a soft thing. There and gone again. Billy swallows, loud in the charged space they share, before he pats Steve's chest once and finally heads out.

Steve hears him start ribbing the kids, corralling them into some halfhearted argument. Even from here he can hear how it's missing heat. Billy's trying to play whatever just—just happened off, and Steve knows that because he's done it plenty with girls. Kissing them

in front of Tommy and Carol and then starting up a conversation to get out of a *talk*. No consequence that way.

At least that's what he used to think.

But really all he can think about now is how Billy couldn't even meet his eyes.

-

The kids complain as they walk, arguing about the demodogs and the labs and the fact Billy is here to see it all, that he knows. Max keeps sending him wayward glances, wary and more than a little upset by it. Steve understands the feeling.

Billy hasn't looked at him once since he kissed him and honestly? Steve's a little miffed by it. To just be kissed and left hanging, no explanation. But then, Billy had explained a little about his time before Hawkins but—but does that mean he likes Steve a *lot*.

"Jesus Christ," he tells himself. "Get it together. You're not ten."

This isn't some *crush*, okay? He's still in love with Nancy, and he's trying not to be. Really, he is. And he's got a whole list of other problems to figure out first, the first of which involves living to see a *new* day, keeping the kids alive and *then* dealing with Billy Hargrove.

Billy, who *likes* him, apparently?

Steve's outright glaring at the back of Billy's mullet as they walk and he sees Billy fidget. His steps falter, and then he's looking over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow, as if to ask what his problem is. And to be honest, Steve has several hundred.

"I got something on me?" Billy bites out, looking forward again quickly before he has a chance to catch Steve's eyes.

Steve grunts and keeps his wonderings and his questions and his complaints to himself.

It's not even that he minded the kiss. That's the confusing part.

Tommy once suggested they practice kissing *in case of girls* when they were around eleven or twelve, but Steve had just laughed at him. He wonders now if Tommy had been serious. Wonders if that would have helped him prepare for any eventual Billy-shaped scenarios. Probably not, but, wishful thinking.

It's the kids who turn into the woods then, noticing the departure Steve had first found. He stops in his tracks, watching them go, knowing there's probably nothing in the woods right now, but—but he just can't make himself move.

It's Billy who turns finally, noticing his absence. He sighs and flips him off.

"Come on, King Steve. What will the nerds do without you there to lead them?"

But he just—*can't*.

He liked the kiss. It's baffling.

Billy had felt warm and solid and smelled good and his lips had been soft. He couldn't even taste any lingering cigarettes.

"Harrington?" Billy calls, walking over. He stops near enough that Steve could reach out and grab him if he wanted. But he stays put.

He's about to see Nancy. He doesn't want to see Nancy, he wants to see her. He's the only one who knows now how she answered the question that just about broke his heart the rest of the way. It's a mending thing, he knows, yeah, but it still hurts to remember it. And she'll never know the moment even happened, and it's not *fair*. And he fucking *liked* it when Billy fucking Hargrove *kissed him*.

"Hey man, what gives. You trip a wire or something?" Billy asks him, looking uncertainly at the ground.

"No mines. I'm just—I'm having a panic I think. Kind of having another crisis."

"Another? You have more than one?"

Steve glares at him. "You kissed me."

Billy sends a glare of his own back. "I lost the fucking bet."

Steve's hand is grabbing at Billy's shirt before he realizes he's doing it. "You kissed me, Billy."

And Billy kind of sways with it. Takes a step closer, looks at Steve's mouth with slowly widening eyes. "Yeah. What're you gonna do about it?"

He palms at Billy's racing heart. His shoulder, his neck—the skin there overheated and flushed all the way up to his cheeks and ears. Billy wants to run, he can tell. But Steve holds firm, cups Billy's face maybe a little too rough.

"I don't know what to do here," he admits, gently. Tries to get Billy to understand without having to explain himself because he doesn't even get it. Not totally. "You gotta help me out."

Billy's breath shudders out in a rush. Then he's trying to jerk away from the hand on his face. It snaps something loose in him, all the tension leaving at once and he's reaching with his other hand, dropping the bat. He's cradling Billy's face and holding him and god, he just wants to understand.

"I'm so fucking sick of being out of the loop with things, Billy," he says. "You don't even know how sick I am."

"Yeah, you're real fucking sick. Trying to fucking neck with me—"

"Shut the hell up," Steve snips softly, shaking him a little. "You know that's bullshit. Who cares?" he asks. "Who cares?"

Billy's eyes flit between his, frantic. "I do."

"*Why?*"

"You really gotta ask me that? I didn't know you were that stupid."

"I mean—I *mean*, Billy," Steve says, "Just level with me here."

"I should beat the shit out of you for this. Do it all over again, ten times worse."

"No," Steve urges, "No. You should fucking kiss me again."

And it's something dark in Billy's eyes that shakes loose at that. Shows up in the way his lips tremble into something like a smile.

A light flashes through the trees and then it's Nancy and Jonathan calling his name.

It's Steve who drops his hands, who steps back. It's Billy's hand that's slow to slip free from his waist.

Steve hadn't even noticed Billy was touching him.

-

It takes some convincing, but Nancy eventually drops the issue of Billy being in on things. She eventually caves and asks him if he knows how to fight and Billy, ever in Billy fashion, says, "Fuck yes I do, princess."

They've been hanging out at the gate to the labs for ten minutes before Steve realizes it's probably because the fight between him and Billy hasn't happened yet that's letting them be so...open to Billy being here. He hasn't slammed Lucas to a wall. He hasn't had to be drugged unconscious to keep from killing Steve. To them, right now, he's just the asshole big brother to Max.

Steve rubs at his jaw, remembering.

Billy's talking with...with *Jonathan*, of all people, and staring at Steve all the while. He can't imagine what they have to talk about. Dustin is fiddling with the gate's buttons again.

But then it's Joyce and Hopper and Will and Mike and squealing car tires and guns and blood and lab sirens. Steve is almost surprised he feels the same adrenaline he felt the first time, hurrying everyone into cars and speeding off.

The only difference now is it's Billy's knee pressed tight to his in the

backseat.

-

As the others pour into the Byers house, it's Steve and Billy bringing up the back. Steve's watching Billy walk in slow, stopping at one point entirely. He stares inside the open door and takes a deep breath and Steve knows he's thinking about the fight too. But he doesn't know why Billy would have a reason to be bothered by it.

He brushes Billy's shoulder and says, "Come on, it's warmer inside."

And Billy listens.

-

The one good thing about Billy being present is that Steve's not thinking about Nancy. And Nancy reroutes when she realizes it's Billy helping Steve gather supplies for the shed to block out light. It's Billy who's helping him collect heaters off to the side, if only to speed things up for later on.

"You sure this doesn't kill that kid?" Billy asks him at one point and Steve nods.

Billy curses and watches them carry Will inside the shed to tie him up.

Yeah, it's a bad night all around.

"By the way, you might wanna stay inside for the next part."

-

Steve almost takes the phone off its hook but then remembers; he's trying not to change much. He leaves it on. Wants to be the one to rip it off the wall when it starts ringing.

Then it's the demodogs again and the rancid smell of black blood and Billy's arms flexing as he holds up Steve's bat as a body flies through a window. Billy whacks it once, on reflex.

And then Steve can breathe a little easier, pretend he hasn't known what's next all day and night, because El is here. Things will be okay.

He didn't let anybody die on his watch.

-

Billy's disappeared somewhere inside the house. Steve suspects he's the one holed up in the bathroom with the door shut, so he goes out to pretend to sort the space heaters himself.

And he knows it's coming. He does. Nancy walks up and he tries his best to smile at her. Because smiling is easy with her, always was.

"It's okay," he tells her, again and again, and means it more than he used to.

-

Steve finds Billy out back once the house is quiet. Without Billy revving a Camaro's engine and busting in to beat his face in, it ends up being a pretty easy drag.

Billy's smoking and offers a drag to Steve when he draws near.

Steve takes it and inhales, long and deep. Breathes back out twin trails of smoke out his nose that Billy tracks like a hound. Steve returns the smoke and Billy taps it on a pinky.

"Weird."

"What is?"

"That we're not bleeding right now. I think I should have had that needle in me what, a half hour past?" He takes another drag. Rasps, "Feels nice."

It does feel nice. Feels so nice his hands itch to do something stupid. Something new.

He doesn't. He says, "It'll be a while now but we gotta head to the tunnels, burn up the nest. Then the gate closes and we're home free."

"Home free," Billy echoes, dry about it.

"You okay?"

Billy hums, unpleasant. He drops the cigarette on the cement, digging his heel in to snuff it dead.

"Peachy." Then, "So, tell me about these tunnels."

-

The tunnels are hellish as ever but Steve knows the way now. He leads while the kids trail him, Billy rounding out the tail. They weave and wind through the tunnels and find Dart where he expects them to.

Billy kind of does this stuttery gaspy thing Steve's never heard him do before. Dustin feeds his poor excuse for a pet a candy bar while the kids walk by, and Steve's left gripping Billy's elbow to lead him out.

He leans in and says, close in Billy's ear, "This one's not the problem. Harmless, really."

When they're well and truly past, Billy slaps his arm and hisses, "Fucking monsters, man."

-

It goes quicker. The nest burns. Billy lifts Dustin and then *Steve*, hauling him up by the hips and then the thighs. It takes all the kids to help pull him the rest of the way and then it's Steve grabbing at Billy, scared for the first time since the junkyard. It hits him all at once how much he doesn't want to see Billy get hurt, get eaten, get killed.

"Come on," he grinds out, Billy's fingers digging bruises into his forearm. "Come on."

They're out in time, Billy falling half on Steve's side, for them to be flooded in headlights.

Billy's hand squeezes his arm, finds his hand and squeezes his fingers. He's trembling and it's small but there and Steve wishes they didn't

have so many eyes on them right now.

So he tugs until Billy's looking at him, and he mouths, "Forest line."

Billy's throat bobs.

-

Steve commands the kids stay by the car while they wait to hear on their walkies about what to do next. He already knows they're in the clear, the gate is officially closed, but right now all he cares about is Billy shuffling along behind him as they make their way to the edge of the woods.

When the kids asked where they were going, Billy snapped about needing to piss. It did the trick.

Ten trees deep, Billy's pushing Steve behind a trunk, hands hard as they find his shoulders. He pushes at Steve's jacket until it's falling off his shoulders, Billy's cold fingers dragging over his collarbone.

Steve sees Billy lick his lips and they're red, flushed from the chill, and his blood is singing like it does when he uses his bat. Hands finding Billy's waist, he pulls him closer, feeling Billy's exhale more than hearing it.

"Come here," Steve murmurs to him, tasting Billy's warm breath as it skirts over his face, centers on his mouth. "Closer, Billy."

"Steve, has anybody ever told you you're pushy as—" Billy says, gets cut off.

And it's Steve who kisses him now because he's never done this before, and he knows Billy hasn't either. And Billy is eager hands and startled teeth clacking against his, but he's warm and they figure it out from there.

Billy whispers his name and it makes Steve feel braver than he is.

vii. will byers is alive, will byers did not die

Steve wakes up. He doesn't remember falling asleep.

Steve feels fine and then he doesn't.

He throws up on the floor, and he wonders if it'll stain with how bad he's treated it lately, along with his sink, his shirt, his hands.

He stands and showers, feels dizzy the whole time. Makes himself cereal, because looking at eggs right now has him feeling woozy all over again.

He doesn't dig out the phone book, because he knows Dustin's number by heart now. He doesn't call Dustin.

He doesn't get dressed.

He sits in a pair of sweatpants, no shirt and sits at his kitchen counter, staring into his hands. He wonders how many days he'll have to live again and again and again to finally get the clock to start ticking the way it should. He wonders how old he'll be when it finally works. He wonders if he'll age while everyone around him doesn't, if they'd even notice.

There's a knock on his door.

Steve takes a deep breath, smoothes back his mess of hair. He should have brushed it. It hangs in his eyes and it's bugging the shit out of him. He can't catch his breath.

At least he and Billy are...different. On better terms. Maybe, a *thing*? Together? He doesn't know. Just knows he likes the way it feels when Billy shakes apart in his arms on a cold Indiana night and really, that's what matters in Hawkins. Who you're willing to stick out the weather with. Monsters are chump change compared to a cold snap.

He laughs at himself, calls himself stupid, hopes more than anything Billy will still remember him. That Billy will remember everything. That Steve won't be alone in these endless days.

He opens the door and it's Jonathan there. He smiles.

Steve lets him in if only because he's very confused.

"Hey Steve," Jonathan says in his quiet way. He kind of shrugs towards the entry, then out towards his beat up car. Like he can't decide if he's coming or going.

"Hey...man. What's up?"

"Just checking in? Since last night was pretty crazy."

Last night, as in—

"You remember? Last night, you remember the—the labs and Will and the tying up and the—the gate closing, and—"

Jonathan looks at him strangely. "...Yes?" He laughs a little awkwardly. "Good thing I came by. Are you alright, after everything?"

"Yeah! Yes. Wow. I just, uh." He stops, catches his breath. Tries to blink away the wetness gathering at his lashes. "Yeah, just. Had a hard time sleeping. Bad dreams. Probably gonna be a while."

"Same here. Will slept great, at least."

"Nothing says a good night's sleep like interdimensional possession, amiright?"

Their laughter is middling at best.

They stand there, not looking at each other. Steve can feel the odd tension in the air. It's not bad, but it's not good either.

They both start talking at the same time, so Steve waves a hand, gets Jonathan to go first.

"I just," Jonathan mumbles. "I wanted to come by and say thanks for not having a problem with me."

"For what, man?"

He shuffles. "You know. With Nancy."

"Oh."

"Yeah. We didn't plan it, obviously. That'd be awful. But I just had this crazy dream a couple nights ago. Like all of us were in front of Hawkins lab and we talked. And you forgave us? I think? God, sorry, this sounds nuts."

Steve can't breathe. "No. No, it's not. I mean it's been a bad couple days, man." He shrugs. "But you know I don't blame her. Or you, right? I know she's happier with you than she was with me. We just weren't...we didn't fit like I wanted. And that's okay."

It hurts still. But looking at Jonathan now, at the hand he's holding out for him to shake, it's easy to have it hurt a little less.

"Friends?" Jonathan asks him, so sincere, and Steve meets his eyes.

Steve takes his hand, clasps it in both of his. "Always, Jonathan."

"Cool," he murmurs. He sticks his hands back in his pockets and almost hops out of Steve's threshold. "Maybe we can all catch a flick next weekend. Will's idea."

"Really?"

Jonathan just shrugs. "I want him to rest. But we should all still go sometime."

Steve nods, smiling a little at the idea. It's been a while since he's just hung out with friends.

There's a shimmer off the hood of a car in the distance, an engine rumbling down his street. Steve shifts his focus from Jonathan's well meaning smile, his honest goodbye, and recognizes the black-blue tint of a Camaro.

"Sounds good man. If not now, then another day."

Jonathan lifts a hand as he heads down to his car. "Just another day!"

The Camaro pulls up just as Jonathan is driving away, and it's Billy there, it's Billy *here*, Billy with his blue eyes and a bruise on his cheek, and a grin so fucking wide, Steve can't help but return it.

After all, it's a good day.

Just like any other.